



**Testimony of Ellen Small Billard, M.S.W.**

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**Human Services Committee**

**February 10, 2011**

**In support of S.B. 840 An Act Concerning Educational Opportunities for Participants in  
the Jobs First Program and  
H.B. 6218 An Act Establishing a Task Force on Safety Net Services**

Good morning Senator Musto, Representative Tercyak, and members of the Human Services committee. My name is Ellen Small Billard, and I am the coordinator of CABHN, the Connecticut Alliance for Basic Human Needs. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

**I am here in support of S.B. 840 An Act Concerning Educational Opportunities for  
Participants in the Jobs First Program and H.B. 6218 An Act Establishing a Task Force on  
Safety Net Services.**

CABHN is a statewide advocacy and outreach network committed to helping CT families meet their basic needs, achieve self-sufficiency, and attain economic security. It is also a participating member of the Welfare Working Group. The Welfare Working Group consists of approximately 25 dedicated advocates who have worked together since 1995 to monitor the impact of Connecticut's family welfare program and the federal TANF program on low-income families and to propose policies to improve the program.

Recently CABHN and the Welfare Working Group hosted a forum and released a report titled ***"Increasing Opportunity: Improving the Jobs First Employment Services Program,"*** which highlights the job training and educational needs of recipients of Temporary Family Assistance (TFA, or cash assistance). **I have attached a copy of this report to my written testimony.**

The report reflects the experiences of Jobs First program participants, details the challenges these families face in moving from poverty to gainful employment, and offers constructive solutions to help them make a successful transition to self-sufficiency. **The responses we received clearly demonstrate that job training and educational opportunities are imperative to moving families out of poverty.**

**It is for this reason that I support S.B. 840 An Act Concerning Educational Activities for  
Participants in the Jobs First Program.**

The responses also highlight, however, that the current Jobs First program is not moving families out of poverty and into stable jobs that pay a living wage. In fact, it is worth noting that **of the over 50 recipients of cash assistance interviewed for our report, not one felt that he/she had moved out of poverty and into stable employment.**

Allow me to give an example from our research:

A young woman in Middletown enrolled in the Jobs First program worked overnight stocking at Target making \$13/hour while she completed training to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (C.N.A.), a program offered through Jobs First. Upon completion of her training, she left her job at Target to become a C.N.A., something she thought was a promising career, where she instead earned \$11/hour—\$2 less an hour than she made without Jobs First training. **She was unable to escape poverty working the job the Jobs First program trained her for.**

I share this example because it is representative of the experience of many Jobs First participants who diligently work to complete trainings and maintain compliance with the program only to find that they are not guaranteed a job once they receive certification and the jobs they do receive are not going to lift them out of poverty.

Perhaps one Jobs First participant from Hartford put it best:

**“How do you expect people to get a job if they don’t have an education? I wanted to go to school and get an education. I did NOT want to receive cash assistance. But I had to care for my child, and I was not able to comply with the Jobs First program if I went to school. *You have to help people get a real education, not just give them certificates for trainings.*”**

**We must restructure the Jobs First program to provide participants with legitimate opportunities for education and quality job training.**

**S.B. 840** takes an important step toward achieving this goal by allowing participants who are actively engaged in furthering their education—be it through Adult Basic Education, vocational education, subsidized employment, or higher education—to receive an extension on their receipt of cash assistance benefits.

I would also encourage you to consider a no-cost pilot project version of this bill, which this committee voted to raise earlier this week. I have attached this language to my written testimony.

**H.B. 6218 An Act Establishing a Task Force on Safety Net Services** also provides an important opportunity to strengthen the Jobs First program, as well as other safety net services vital to lower-income families, by examining what works and what doesn’t for families enrolled in Connecticut’s family welfare program.

I would, however, encourage the Committee to **amend the current language of the bill to include additional task force members including state employees, community providers, advocates, and program participants.** I have attached revised language to my written testimony.

**I urge you to support both S.B. 840 and H.B. 6218** as opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness of the Jobs First program and change the way we serve families on cash assistance by increasing access to educational opportunities and subsidized employment.

Although I am not testifying on them today, I am also supportive in concept of:

- H.B. 5558 An Act Concerning Educational Opportunities for Recipients of Temporary Family Assistance Benefits through the Jobs First Employment Services Program
- H.B. 5432 An Act Concerning Limits on Sanctions under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Program

Thank you for your time and consideration to these important bills.

For an electronic copy of "Increasing Opportunity: Improving the Jobs First Employment Services Program," please visit [www.larcc.org](http://www.larcc.org) and click on "Hot Topics."

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